

# *The Origins of Early* HOLLYWOOD

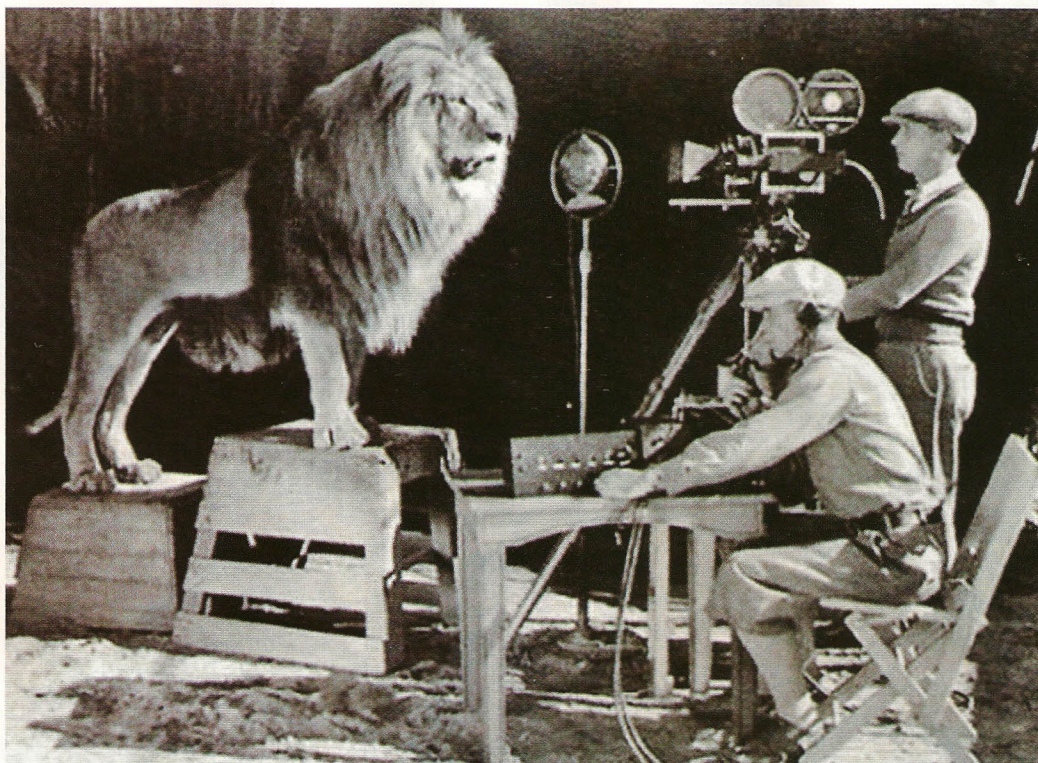
Part 4

## The Rise & Rise of the Hollywood Film Studios

The demands of the now massive film-going public created a need for a greater number of films, preferably starring their favourite "movie stars". These ingredients gave birth to the studio system.

By the early 1920's Hollywood was awash with small, independent motion picture companies, the majority of them located in makeshift premises. But for some, as quick as they set up shop, they folded, either unable to keep up with the demand for more product or an inability to invent "stars" that appealed to the public. Others were eventually bought out by more astute immigrant businessmen such as Adolph Zukor, William Fox and Louis B. Mayer, who swiftly learned the means of applying American business methods to this new industry which they considered to be very unique on many levels. The major factor that excited them most was that people paid for their product then left without taking it with them, allowing their product to be shown repeatedly to new audiences every single day of the week. These new movie moguls initiated the studio "factory" system, which was essentially based on rigid control of long term contracts for stars, directors and writers; lavish in-house production and publicity departments.

The production, distribution and exhibition of motion pictures were originally controlled



separately, but as the industry rapidly grew, these functions became vertically integrated under the now powerful studio production chiefs, who were able to maximise profits by distributing their movies into theatres they now owned in every major city in America.

Consequently, at the end of the 1920's, most of the small independents were gone, totally absorbed by "The Big Five" that were to rule and monopolise Hollywood for the next three decades: MGM, Paramount, Fox, Warner Bros. and RKO. "The Little Three": Universal,

Columbia and United Artists, also made motion pictures, but, at the time, each of them lacked one of the crucial elements of vertical integration to be considered a major player.

The "Big Five" companies' movie productions were as distinct as their individual studio logos.

**Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer** was created by the amalgamation of three minor studios and inherited the former Goldwyn mascot and corporate logo (Leo the Lion & Ars Gratia Artis). The company's first two





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lavish 1925 productions of *Ben-Hur* and *The Big Parade* established an image for MGM that persisted for years – high production values and a galaxy of early film stars including Greta Garbo, John Gilbert and Jean Harlow. MGM's movies reflected its logo and by the 1930s was considered to be King of the Studios.

### Paramount-Famous Players

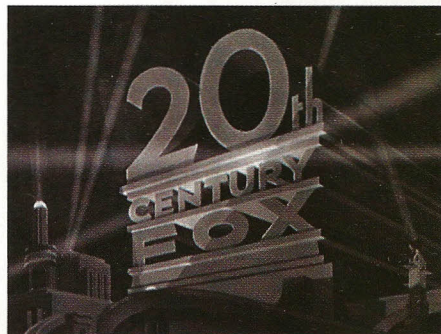
**Lasky** soon outgrew their original studio space hired by Cecil B. DeMille for the very first feature filmed entirely in Hollywood. They elected to purchase the massive United Studios just north of Melrose Avenue. The studio's logo of the Majestic Mountain surrounded by 24 stars (representing their 24 contracted movie actors) is the oldest surviving film logo still in



use today – albeit there are now only 22 stars depicted. Many of Hollywood's most celebrated films, directors and stars emanated from Paramount – amongst them Rudolph Valentino, Mary Pickford, Clara Bow and Gary Cooper. The very first film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture, *Wings* (1927), was a Paramount production. For many, Paramount endures as the essential studio that epitomised the sophistication, glamour and illusion that typified all of the legendary studios of the past. As the director Ernst Lubitsch once elaborated, "I have been to Paris, France but Paris, Paramount is better"

### Fox Film Corporation

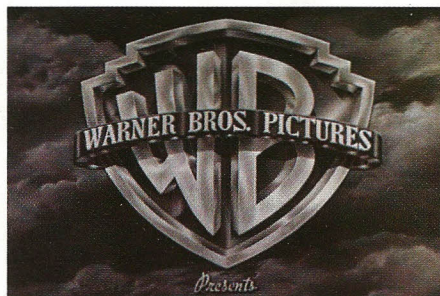
William Fox, who introduced film audiences to Movietone newsreels, arrived in Hollywood in 1915 and built Movietone City in Beverly Hills,



which was easily the best equipped studio of its time. Fox's first star was Tom Mix, giving the company's movies a homespun Americana theme. It also pioneered the first widescreen film: *The Big Trail*. But the 1929 stock market crash coincided with Fox negotiating a failed bid for MGM, which practically bankrupted him. For the next seven years he battled to retain control of his studio only to lose it to a conglomerate, who swiftly amalgamated it with the young upstart Darryl F. Zanuck's Twentieth Century Pictures. Zanuck retained his renowned art deco logo with illuminating searchlights, adding the name Fox to the bottom tier.

### Warner Bros.

Harry, Albert, Sam and Jack Warner, like virtually all their fellow film pioneers, started out in the nickelodeon business. They came West



in 1919 and by 1923 had built a plantation style studio at Sunset & Bronson, becoming Hollywood's only family-owned-and-operated outfit. They bought out the Vitagraph Company, which secured for the brothers a nationwide distribution system. Their first bankable

commodity though was a "dog" who appeared in *Where the North Begins*, which introduced Rin-Tin-Tin to cinema goers. The German Shepherd became an instant success, spawning dozens of movies over the next few years and generating monster profits for the company. But WB's greatest accomplishment was the transition from silents into sound. Strength, Power and Supremacy are clearly depicted from the shield like shape of the Warner Bros. logo.



### RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum)

arrived fairly late in Hollywood. Joseph P. Kennedy had bought a number of small studios plus a chain of Vaudeville theatres. He then merged his purchases with RCA (Radio-Corporation of America) which had developed a sound system. The studio, now named RKO Radio Pictures Inc., quickly released its first "talkie" – *Syncopation* (1929). However, their early productions were considered mediocre, even though *Cimarron* (1931) won the Academy Award. But perseverance and the hiring of David O. Selznick delivered a great batch of popular movies throughout the 1930's such as *King Kong*, the Astaire-Rogers and Tarzan series, and the distribution of Walt Disney cartoons, which soon moved them into the major studio league.

The company's logo of a spinning globe with an antenna on top and accompanying Morse code spelling out "A Radio Picture" still remains today the most favourite studio logo amongst film buffs.

To Be Continued...